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ABSTRACT

Social service workers and artists from 16 cities attended a conference to share their experiences and hopes for child welfare. The conference opened with a theater performance telling the story of an inner city teenager who dreams of dancing professionally but becomes involved in selling crack; the audience helps to create the story's ending. Participants then worked together to discover bases for unity and to list the philosophical underpinnings of their mutual commitment to child welfare. In this process, participants found that a common language addressing creative work does not exist between social service providers and artists, and the search for clarity was sometimes frustrating. Participants discussed what partnerships between the arts and social services could accomplish with targeted youth including developing in young people the ability to self-evaluate and to express their emotions, helping service providers tap into their own creativity, helping troubled youth perceive their societal importance, sharing resources and training, forming a national network to foster communication among local programs, sponsoring local conferences, and presenting position papers. The group's consensus was that ways must be found to demonstrate the positive results that creative work can engender, so that partnerships between social service professionals and artists can flourish. (JDD)

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ED 378 188

Imagine the Difference

BUILDING ARTISTIC PARTNERSHIPS TO SAVE OUR CHILDREN

National Conference, March 1993

Activities and Outcomes

prepared by
Jennifer Nelson

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> ...the arts can be used to reach young minds. And if we can reach young minds deep enough, we can teach young minds deep enough so that they will change the negative concept they have of themselves from which most of the negative social consequences flow. If they catch one glimpse of how beautiful they can be, as against the reinforcement of how ugly they are, that the society and abandonment and cruelty and hunger imposes upon them, they will change. If we can reach in with the arts and touch the imagination of the child, no matter who, we have affected that child. Art is the immediate intervener in the cycle of poverty. It opens the doors of the mind immediately and the bird of the human spirit can fly free. We've seen it, we know it works.
>
> Ossie Davis, renowned actor

America, poised on the brink of the millennium, is confronted with a frightening epidemic of substance abuse and related violent crime among the young. While many individuals and programs have dedicated themselves to fighting these trends, it is clear that this epidemic continues to grow. We must accept the mandate to intervene with new strategies designed to meet this unique challenge.

When Living Stage undertook the **Imagine the Difference! Building Artistic Partnerships to Save Our Children** conference in March 1993, it was with full commitment to the principles outlined in Ossie Davis' eloquent statement. But it was also with the knowledge that Living Stage, as any arts organization, cannot deliver its prevention services in a vacuum. Whatever message of hope is borne into the culture by artists must be synchronized with what is emanating from other respected sources.

The commercial media spews images of vengeful violence, abusive and exploitative behavior, and destruction, with evident callous disregard for the long-term effects viewing such images has on the young. Pressure to acquire more and more expensive consumer goods makes young people increasingly disdainful of traditional values of hard work and education. And many of the early strategies designed have fallen short of their goal to effect real changes in behavior.

In the face of such monumental opposition, no one artist or arts organization could expect to achieve maximal effect alone. Clearly what is needed is for partnerships to form among individuals and groups that hold common values concerning the welfare of our children and the future direction of our society.

Perhaps the most logical place for socially conscious artists to seek partners is within another professional community equally dedicated to saving lives: social service workers/preventionists. Public servants in the finest sense of the term, these women and men daily put their lives on the front line, directly interacting with children, teens, and their parents in an effort to provide various support services that often make the difference between life and death.

The group of social service workers and artists who answered the call to attend the **Imagine the Difference** conference represented sixteen cities from California to New York and Illinois to Texas, testament itself to the national scope of the problem. Each city was represented by one preventionist and one artist, in keeping with the goal of partnership development. In two short days, conference participants shared their experiences, hopes and dreams. Perhaps most importantly, they recommitted themselves to seeking effective solutions to dire problems through collaborative strategies which partner the strengths of their respective professions.

The following captures not only the events of the conference, but the spirit and sense of community that developed.

PROLOGUE

The conference opened with a performance by the Living Stage Theatre Company. Living

Stage is the community outreach program of Arena Stage, and works intensely with at-risk youth in the Washington, D.C. area. The performance told the story of an inner city teenager. Although she had dreams of becoming a professional dancer, she had become involved in selling crack to acquire the glittery lifestyle offered to her by quick profits. As her relationships with her addict mother and sadistic dealer spiraled to a violent climax, the audience was asked to help create an ending to the story. The following excerpts from the ensuing suggestions reflect the tone to come in the next day's discussions.

"I would like to see a transformation in our society so it becomes one in which economic justice exists and the young people see futures for themselves."

"We need to redefine success in the eyes of our young."

"If the family creates a secure environment, the kids wouldn't be interested in or want these clowns like Raheem (the dealer)."

"These men represent immediate gratification and...the girls are starved for that kind of dream."

"She finds someone who is the right person (a mentor) at the right time to give her the idea of an inner spirituality that we all need to have."

Audience members joined in playing out a very moving, redemptive ending based on their passionate suggestions. This creative, collective experience became a gridwork upon which to build, and a common reference point for subsequent discussions.

PART ONE: FINDING CONNECTIONS

After an inspirational speech by Dr. Reed Tuckson, President of Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science, and former Commissioner of Public Health for the District of Columbia, participants rolled up their sleeves and got to work. The first task was to

determine, who are we? Or, how do we define ourselves and our work?

Individuals from very different disciplines and backgrounds discovered bases for unity out of their common human-ness, and also realized that their work motivation was very similar.

This unity was an important starting point, because it became clear that the preventionists were not necessarily fully aware of how arts professionals could see their work as substance abuse prevention. For the arts workers, it was perhaps easier to understand the thrust of the social service work, but learning that there was a shared sense of purpose and motivation created another bridge to partnership.

Conference participants were divided into five breakout groups to which they were assigned throughout the conference. The partners from each city were grouped according to similarity of region, as much as possible. Named the Suns, Moons, Stars, Mountains, and Oceans, the groups first made lists of qualities that form the philosophical underpinnings of their mutual commitment. Though each group manifested its own unique character, there were many overlapping choices. The following is representative of the lists of qualities compiled:

> Commitment, affirmation, culture, spirituality, support, pain, interaction, anticipation, connection, sharing, compassion, creativity, sensitivity, risking, dedication, resiliency, love, imagination, frustration, rage, radical change, questioning, vulnerability, tenacity, service, challenge, and questioning.

After the lists were compiled in the small group breakout sessions, the full group reconvened to share what had occurred. Each group presented to the whole an introductory statement attesting to the openness of their dialogue. Some presentations exhibited the enormous creativity of the participants. For example, one group, rather than simply verbalize, used paper

and pens to create imaginative visual aids that illustrated their choices. The imagination and good humor displayed added dimension to the proceedings and served to re-inspire the entire body as to the creative nature of partnerships being explored.

PART TWO: DREAMING THE DIFFERENCE

After a lunch break, participants reassembled in their small groups. Their task in this session proved more complex: they were to discuss what partnerships between the arts and social services could accomplish with targeted youth. Perhaps it was not surprising that a good deal of these discussions centered around trying to find common definitions for the role of the arts in prevention work. This search for clarity was sometimes frustrating, but ultimately enlightening, and formed a further source of unity.

The Mountain group began with recognition of a fact that resurfaced throughout the remainder of the conference: that is, that it cannot be assumed that a common language addressing creative work exists between social service providers and artists. The "artistic process" which is regarded as intensely transformative--even life saving-- by those engaged in the arts, is not a term that necessarily resonates to those engaged in social service work. Although group members agreed that all were engaged in youth work to effect change, they struggled to expand the language describing creative opportunities to allow for supportive interchange.

By hammering at the issue of how to articulate the substance and value of the creative act, the Mountains underscored the need to define the underlying principles which can direct the mechanisms for prevention. These principles could provide the common ground for unity

between artists and social service workers, regardless of craft-specific language. Articulation of shared principles would facilitate communication of strategies between the "villages" of professions.

The Sun group echoed the concern for a set of common principles. They were able to identify two major goals both artists and social service workers should pursue: to develop in young people the ability to self-evaluate and to express their emotions.

Beyond these aims, the Suns strongly agreed on the need for networking all prevention service providers. They suggested evolving a partnering relationship validated by scientific language to gain acceptance in the bureaucracy that often surrounds publicly funded social services.

The Moon group also tried to define the artistic process. They agreed it is a non-linear discovery; a universal way of integrating our separate sensory faculties; the liberation of the imagination; a moving experience that is greater than the sum of its parts, and moves one to fulfill needs. They went on to state that preventionists must tap into their own creativity to be able to expand what they do with youth.

The Stars concluded that the artistic process is a transformative personal process through which an individual seeks to impact upon her/his environment. Putting this process in the hands of troubled youth allows them to perceive their own societal importance. Beyond this, the Stars, like the other groups, struggled to verbalize elements of this process in a way that would stand up to the scrutiny of social service guidelines. They uncovered one fundamental difference between the arts and social service as traditionally practiced: social service seeks measurable results, and the arts experience results that often can not be measured against traditional

standards.

Clearly, some way must be found to demonstrate the positive results that creative work can engender, so that the partnership between social service professionals and artists can flourish. This was the general consensus when the full group came together again. There was a sense of frustrated excitement with the realization that it would be difficult to move forward without that shared vocabulary. However, there was also hope that a coalition could develop to assist in reaching some definitions.

PART THREE: PLANNING FOR TOMORROW

In the final set of small group discussions, participants were asked to envision specific ways in which the partnership between artists and social service providers could work together.

The Oceans outlined a two-pronged networking attack, envisioning action on local and national fronts.

On the local front, the group saw individual projects involving artists and preventionists coming together to "define their turfs," or clarify how they all work towards similar goals, although they may have been in the past pitted against each other for shrinking amounts of funding. Alliances could form to share resources, and to share training in innovated techniques.

The Oceans also elaborated on the national front. They saw a national network becoming an educational effort to muster visibility and acceptance for creative specialists, as well as funding for projects. A national network could also foster communication among local programs, set standards for training workers, collect and disseminate documentation of results of creative work, and develop some means of evaluating work. With a national profile validating creative

prevention strategies, linkages could be made with educators and members of the faith community.

The Moon group spoke of specific activities they would like to undertake in their own communities. These included plans to form partnerships to share resources, studio space, and funding. One group member was determined to spearhead a partnering project in South Carolina the following May.

The Mountain group called for local conferences to be convened along the model of **Imagine the Difference**. These conferences would be coordinated to give birth to a series of interconnected local associations that would, in turn, share information. Both local and national directories would be created, facilitating the sharing of techniques and personnel. These might include sympathetic judges and other juvenile justice workers as well as artists and social service providers.

The Mountains repeated the need for a means to effectively communicate what happens when one engages in a creative process, so that the creative process will be seen as a practical means of empowering change. Some sort of demonstration component was suggested, such as probationary placement of adjudicated youth in arts projects. This would accomplish the integration of art, therapy and employment.

Finally, the Mountains called for active advocacy newsletters presenting position papers as well as network news and an electronic bulletin board.

Many of these goals were echoed by the Sun group: the need for extensive training for artists and social service preventionists, the need for a position paper that explains why the arts work in prevention, the need for local conferences including local officials and media, and the

need for lists of available resources.

The Suns added a call for a follow-up conference one year from the date of **Imagine the Difference**, to take stock of what had been done and to evaluate strategies.

The Suns would like to see the arts assumed to be valuable components in high risk youth strategies, including intervention work in substance abuse, AIDS, teen pregnancy, violence and crime, sexual abuse and rape, child abuse, racism and poverty. This higher value should also be reflected in better compensation for the workers involved.

The Stars focused again on the importance of arriving at a common language/vocabulary to explain the process of creative work. It was felt that this would facilitate moving such work into the mainstream of prevention work. This language could be disseminated through training programs for both artists and social service preventionists. Position papers on the arts and prevention would also be effective in entering the language into community dialogue.

Upon reconvening as a whole group, conferees continued to try to articulate what is meant by creative process and what the creative process does in prevention work. One point of consensus was that discussion of the creative process must emphasize that it impacts immediately upon the individual child's resiliency, or ability to effectively interface with a wide variety of life experiences. The creative process reinforces resiliency by affirming the child's uniqueness and self-worth.

THE CALL FOR LOCAL AND NATIONAL ACTION

The following is a list of imperatives developed by the whole body as regards creating a national, collaborative initiative:

- expand local teams to serve as national models;
- conduct a national conference to provide training for both artists and preventionists;
- expand the group to include educators;
- write paper to discuss what works;
- disseminate a paper from this conference;
- develop guidelines for responsible programs;
- hold another conference one year from this conference;
- convene an "arts track" at all national prevention conferences;
- apply to CSAP for regional conferences;
- broaden support to reach other agencies;
- find creative ways to fund preventionist/artist collaborations;
- examine specific community needs;
- develop a resource book to identify relevant information and people;
- identify national funding resources; and
- start a network newsletter.

It was further agreed that this conference should be used as a model for convening local and regional meetings and coalitions.

Michael Adams of the Memphis Prevention Network Team; Linda Hansen of Alternatives, Inc. in Hampton, Virginia; Rich Boswell from Challenge, Inc. in Fort Worth; Levi Frazier of the Blue City Cultural Center in Memphis; Carol Penn Erskine of Pennvisions, Inc. in Washington, D.C.; Siti Opio of the Progressive Center for Creativity in Beaufort, South Carolina; and Gloria McCrae from Rocrae Entertainment in Durham, North Carolina, volunteered

to establish a framework for future national action, and to communicate their suggestions to other conference participants.

Specific commitments were also made for local action:

• attendees from New York agreed to hold a local conference in September of 1993, involving the Harlem Boys Choir and Creative Mind Builders;

• attendees from Houston planned to develop an artists' alliance to serve as an umbrella organization for partnership projects;

• attendees from Columbia, South Carolina planned to develop an arts committee in the local Prevention Partnership;

• attendees from Hampton, Virginia planned to work with Head Start teachers to link the arts with resiliency training; and

• attendees from Los Angeles planned to work together with ArtsReach to initiate ideas.

RESULTING ACTIVITIES

Since the **Imagine the Difference** conference in March, 1993, several participants have reported on their follow-up efforts. Some are still in the planning phase, seeking partnerships within their specific communities. A few, however, actually have projects underway. The following is a sampling of what is happening as of September.

In Hampton, Virginia, Linda Hansen reports that a small think-tank has begun to explore the links of creativity and resiliency. They have written a grant proposal to the Department of Education to continue to expand an Arts Institute at the alternative high school, and are applying to CSAP for funding for a regional conference on creativity and prevention.

From Durham, North Carolina, Michael Page is working closely with the local prevention team on the relationship between the Arts Council and prevention professionals to expand its services.

In Beaufort, South Carolina, Siti Opio held two sessions of summer workshops with youth linking arts and youth issues.

In Memphis, Tennessee, "Peace in the House," a Stop the Violence conference for youth was held to offer alternatives to violence. It was sponsored by a consortium of local civic, arts, and church groups.

And in Los Angeles, Susan Tanner with the UCLA Extension is making plans to conduct a local conference entitled "MAKING A DIFFERENCE! Artistic Partnerships at Work." This seeks to be a follow-up to the Washington conference; will include legislators and judges as observers; and will produce a document describing model programs for replication. The MAKING A DIFFERENCE conference is planned for July of 1994.

CONCLUSION

Consensus held that **Imagine the Difference! Building Artistic Partnerships to Save Our Children** was an excellent beginning for bringing together the prevention and arts professional communities. The conference provided an inspiring affirmation for the individuals present, letting them know that they are indeed part of a growing trend toward recognizing the need for mechanisms that address the deep spiritual vacuum faced by young people at risk. Building bridges between the arts and prevention techniques is a logical step toward putting more powerful tools in the hands of all who accept the responsibility to be involved in children's lives.

As citizens, artists and preventionists must accept the accountability to show that their work makes a difference in people's lives, and the hands-on approach of working with the arts provides a qualitative, humanistic body of evidence in that consideration. Preventionists and artists must take the initiative to create the programming models that will bring creative strategies to the attention of the national community. To this end, all must accept mutual advocacy to win the support of service agencies and funding sources. As a national agenda for youth is set, the partnership of preventionists and artists must maintain focus on its mission of reaching young people with the message that they can survive with dignity, without succumbing to the lures of destructive behavior.

A partnership based on a shared commitment to changing the lives of children has begun, opening possibilities for new ways of battling old monsters. The central challenge for the artists and preventionists involved is to engage their own creativity in envisioning and implementing specific procedures.